The Hallowed Kings

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The Hallowed Kings

by GracieBirdie

Summary

> “The people who venture into the Dark Wood know what awaits them. Those who live in the Dark Wood know the risks. Though some are naive and some are foolish none should be surprised when they die.”

Notes

> I started writing this story on September 1st, 2017 in celebration of getting a new laptop. I rewrote the beginning of this five times and I just can't stand looking at this part anymore.
>
> unfortunately necessary disclaimer: there are going to be spelling/grammatical errors in this. I know this, no I'm not going to fix it now that I've already posted. No I don't want a beta. Anyone who still decides to point these things out to me will get a mean and/or bitchy response because I warned you. Don't like it don't read it.

The woods are as he expects them to be. Or perhaps how he hoped them to be. They are not as dark as he had assumed but he does not mind. This only means more light to hunt by. He must hunt now, fish will only feed him so long before the taste becomes bland and monotonous. He has not hunted since he was a boy, living in a different wood than this with his father. When his father had died and the boy, a young man by then, had left his woods for a town he had stopped hunting, instead he bought his meat in the marketplace. He supposes old habits and muscle memory will return by the time he grows tired of fish.

The elder woman whom he buys the cabin from sits upon her porch, legs encased in a checked blanket. He does not know if this is because she finds the warmth of the summer day to be less than it is or because she has no legs. He does not ask. It is not his concern.

He wonders why she would sell to him, a stranger who happened upon her by chance. He wants to ask but he will not for fear of offending her. She has said she is a witch. He believes her. Only a witch would live in these woods at her apparent age.

She attempts to stare him in the eye. He attempts to avoid her gaze. He is usually quite successful at this. He is not this time. When she speaks her voice is but a whisper but it carries across the open expanse of lawn between them. “Tell me once more why you want this small and lonely place.”

He has already told her. Perhaps she is leaving because she can no longer live by herself without fear of forgetting to dampen the hearth. He tells her again all the same.

“The town I had lived in for some time has grown too large. There are too many people, too many-” he cuts himself off before he can say the word. Just the thought of it is enough to make him shudder with what he had always believed to be fear. He believes this no longer. Or rather, there is still fear but now there is more fear of himself than there has ever been previously.

He finds he is not surprised when she says the word he cannot bear to, “Murders?” she murmurs. The word seems to be carried on the breeze. He tells himself that is why he is so chilled in the summer sunshine.

He cannot answer. She does not seem to need him to. “Why would one such as yourself wish to live where there are less murders but more senseless death?”

He has asked himself this very question when he had first decided to leave his town for these woods. Had asked in almost these exact words the long walk from the town, through the fields, and into the unknown. Will knows the answer now.

“The people who venture into the Dark Wood know what awaits them. Those who live in the Dark Wood know the risks. Though some are naive and some are foolish none should be surprised when they die.”

The old woman laughs. Strangely, it sounds of water flowing over smooth river stones. He does not know why he thinks this, a laugh can only sound like a laugh. She tells him if he can

pay her for the cabin it is his. He can, and he does.

Will Graham knows this elder witch is not going to be the last person he meets in the Dark Wood. Strangely, he finds himself looking forward to meeting the unknown for the first time since he was a child.

~*~

He has explored much of the surrounding area of his new home. To his reluctant pleasure there is a market place within half a day's walking distance of his cabin.

He is not surprised to discover the people of the Dark Wood appear average. There are only minute differences between those he sees now and those he had seen in the town he previously lived in. He catches glimpse of pointed ears, eyes a color slightly too bright, teeth a touch too sharp. He does not stare. He is as strange as they are.

Will buys salt and bread and rope with the little savings he has left. He starts to hunt once more, sooner than he had anticipated. He begins slowly with rabbit. He catches them in quick-death snares. He eats the meat fresh and spreads the intestines away from the cabin so as not to attract the attention of the wolves he hears howling in the deeper parts of the woods. He cleans the pelts and tans them with their own brains. He wonders if the rabbits would approve of this, if they could understand. He sells the feet and bones and pelts at the market. He tries not to find it strange people buy them without speaking to him. He revels in the silence and falls just a touch more in love with his new home.

Will stumbles upon a deer with a broken leg. He kills her quickly with one slice of his knife. There is no point in prolonging her suffering. He eats all the fresh meat he can, cuts the rest into slices before brining it for hours, salting it, and then storing it in cotton bags behind his cook stove. He spreads the intestines and makes stew with the organs. He whittles the bones into small trinkets and beads. He cleans and tans the hide. He sells his wears in the marketplace to buy blankets and clothing and books, bread and salt. And a bow and arrow heads.

It is as if the discovery of the deer has broken a barrier Will had not even realized was between himself and the wood. He finds himself wandering deeper than he has before. When he happens across wild carrots he realizes the wood can provide him everything else he could need. All he must do now is know where to look.

He discovers untended orchards full of pears and oranges and apples. He is careful not to take more than he could eat. He does not want to offend should he find that they are owned. He stumbles across patches of wild vegetables. Never before in his life has he eaten so well.

A few minutes walk from his cabin, along a well-kept deer path, there is a hot spring. He cannot remember another time he has been so clean, so often.

The wood has provided. Will knows it is only a matter of time before the wood asks him to return their favors. He has assisted humans his entire life and has never found himself so well cared for. He thinks he will not mind helping in exchange for these kind acts that would seem

small to some, but to him they mean another day to eat and live in more comfort than he has ever known.

~*~

One night, many weeks past the day he made the cabin his home, Will hears a distant mournful cry.

He does not fully recognize the sound but he thinks it may be a dog. It was late enough to be early in the morning and he was tempted to leave the animal to it's fate, knowing the sounds it was making would soon draw predators to it to be feasted on. Will feels his heart ache strangely and he finds himself placing his book aside and gathering his bag to make his way out into the night to find the poor injured creature, either to ease it's suffering or to perhaps more selfishly to easy Will's loneliness.

He walks through the darkened woods, moonlight shining brightly through the branches of the endless trees and casting long shadows that he is not fully certain are made of the absence of moonlight. Perhaps they are the fabled creatures that reside in the wood along with Will and the strange people of the market. Perhaps they are the people of the market themselves. He does not stop to check. The sound has grown loader as he has walked and he now recognizes the cries of a wounded animal.

Finally he comes upon a small clearing beside a smaller pond. The water is as still the night around him. No moonlight reflected in the water despite the moon shining high in the open sky above. The water is dark and endless and he wonders for a moment if it is even water at all. He decides he does not want to touch it to find out.

At the edge of the pond is dog. Its long fur is matted and mud splattered. Its body shakes in the mild chill of the Autumn night. The wail it continues to make raises goose flesh on Will's arms and neck.

He steps farther into the clearing, into the dog's line of sight. The sound stops and the dog stares at Will with an intensity that heightens his unease. He moves towards the dog slowly, with palms shown and steps measured.

He knows there will be two outcomes of this meeting. The dog will be far too injured for him to be able to heal it and he will have to ease it's suffering or the dog will come with him to his cabin to mend and grow and thrive.

He knows which outcome he would like but fears the truth he might find hidden within the dog's fur.

He carefully reaches out and the dog shies away from him. He soothes with gentle words and opens his shoulder pouch to pull out a bite of the dried deer meat.

He tosses the meat towards the dog and it snatches the morsel from the air.

It slowly rises to its feet and consciously steps forward towards Will who is still as stone, fascinated by the upturn of the dog's nose as it sniffs the air, longing for another piece of

meat.

Will does not let it wait. This time he hold the meat in his fingertips and the dog delicately takes it from him. He stands and steps backwards in the hopes the dog will follow him and he will be able to judge its ability to walk unaided. The dog does not disappoint him. It follows him with easy and just as gently as before accepts another bite of meat from his hand.

Will begins to turn from the pond, dog looking up towards him with bright brown eyes, when he catches sight of the of the pond. He turns back to watch the surfers water ripple as though a half was running fingers against light cloth.

He stares in fascination as the water moves without breeze or visible creature to move it. He takes a step closer to the water.

Suddenly the trance Will had unwittingly found himself in is broken by the mournful cry of the dog at his side. He looks down at it and for a moment it's soft brown eyes are not as they were. For just a moment they become the eyes of a creature Will cannot name. Or perhaps of a creature he will not name.

He turns his back fully to the pond and makes his way through the moonlight wood, all thoughts of the dog being any other creature than a dog lost to the soft breeze and salt tang of the meat he shares with his new, now silent, companies.

~*~

He has lived in his cabin some time now, although he does not know how long. The days are a comfortingly steady routine. He wakes, he eats, he hunts, he sleeps. Very simple. He sees only the people of the marketplace and only ventures there when he has run out of bread or salt. He speaks only to his dog, whom he names Winston, after the tragic hero of the book he had finished the night he was called by the dog.

His life continues day after day until one morning three ravens appear on his front lawn. They stare silently at his cabin. Will is slightly unnerved but finds them no stranger than any other being of the Dark Wood he has met, although they are the first he has seen outside the market and his hunting. He crumbles stale bread, throwing it to them from his porch. He finds he wants to appease them without falling into a range he could come under attack.

They hop about, snatching crumbs from midair. They are eerily silent. Will feels anticipation for the first time since he traded the town for his woods. He knows these are not average intelligent ravens. Their movements are completely in sync, their silence unnatural. He feeds them anyway.

That day they eat their fill of the only bit of bread he can spare. They stare at him a moment after he holds his empty hands out to show he has no more bread. They make the first sound he had heard all morning. In unison the three make one sharp startling caw. He wonders if they are giving thanks or a warning.

The next morning there are three ravens silently standing on his front lawn. Will feeds them. This time they do not caw. They sing. He finds himself unnerved without reason. He hopes

the ravens do not give him one and it is only old paranoia raising its ugly head.

This feeling of unease is not helped by Winston, who hides away in the woods the moment he sees the creatures.

~*~

Will finds the ravens do not alter his routine much. He must now buy an extra loaf of bread, but he already enjoyed spending the morning drinking tea on the porch. At least now he has something interesting to watch while he fully awakens for the day.

Throughout the day he sometimes hears strange cacophonous singing. He wonders why they sing but he does not ask. He's afraid that they might answer.

One day the singing lowers in volume. It no longer sounds louder than three ravens should be able to produce. He wonders if he has somehow managed to offend them, although he does not know how one might offend a bird.

Finally, the day comes when they make no sound at all. He stares out at them and is reminded of when they first appeared to him. He is as nervous now as he was then, despite the fact he has feed them many time without incident. Something is wrong and he does not know how to fix it. Or if it even can be fixed. He stares at them bread in one hand, mug in the other. He wonders if he will be seeing the end of this day.

The largest raven flutters its wings and hops a few steps towards him. He finds himself frozen by the fear of the unknown. In his many days of living in his new home he has yet to meet any creatures of the evil the Dark Wood is known for. He suspects he is past due and does not dare to hope the ravens are benign.

The raven seems to stare through him. He is transfixed by the seemingly endless black pools of eyes that see more than they should. He is strangely reminded of himself. He does not like it. He cannot look away. The raven calls. This should break the spell Will finds himself under. It does not.

The raven calls again. Will fights the urge to vomit. He does not know why.

The raven calls once more. This time the others join the first. This time it is not the sounds of a bird. This time it is the sound of endless voices whispering across the void of space. "Human, are you a helping human?"

Will does not understand. He thinks perhaps the bird is mocking human speech. He thinks perhaps ravens can do that. He does not know for sure. He does not want to know for sure. He does not want to be here any longer.

But he is here. The woods have become his home. He knows them now. He loves them now. He cannot leave only because he has met a bird that can speak. He had seen the worse humanity can do to itself, has accepted humanities cruelties. He can accept birds that speak in what he thinks the voice of a god might sound like, if a god would bother to speak to a mortal.

Will hopes his voice will not shake when he speaks but he knows it is a fruitless hope. He is afraid after all. “If you need help I can try to help you.” Will Graham has been the recipient of too many empty promises to make his own, he now offers only what he knows himself capable of.

The ravens all look through him. He fights to keep still. He starts to wonder if the raven had spoken at all. When it speaks again, breaking the heavy silence, Will is shocked he had not imagined the sound.

“We do not need help, human. It is only humans who need help.”

This surprises him. He had never thought birds would spend their time attempting to help humans. He finds it strange but he does not want to argue with a creature he does not understand.

“What human needs help?” he supposes he might as well ask, after all he had helped people in the past. Even if there were few who were grateful, Will finds old habits hard to break.

The raven makes a sound Will would relate to a chuckle. If it were made by something with lips. “ *You* need help human.”

Will blinks and looks around himself. He is on the front porch of his cabin, in his woods. His belly is as full as his cupboards. He has not felt a single hint of winter in the air but is prepared for it nonetheless. Will does not need help with anything.

He stares at the ravens and shifts uncomfortably. “Are you, perhaps…thinking of someone else?” He hopes desperately for the ravens to have made a mistake.

The raven continues to stare through him for several long moments. With a quick sharp squawk, the raven’s wings jut out and curl upwards. But it does not fly away, instead it cranes its head towards the ground. It makes a sudden and terrible retching noise. Its wings tremble violently and the other two ravens stare impassively at their distressed third. Will takes one step forward.

The sound of retching increases in volume and Will’s distress grows. He takes another step. He does not even notice he has dropped both his mug and his bread.

The sound abruptly cuts off. For a moment, it feels as though time has been suspended. Nothing moves and Will does not think he even breathes. Then the raven vomits copious amounts of black mire.

He cannot stop himself rushing for the raven. He kneels before it and his hands hover uselessly in the air around it. He does not know what he should do, how he can help this strange being.

The raven raises its’ head and looks Will directly in the eyes. Viscous tendrils of black bile hang from its’ beak. It speaks with a voice that shows no sign of having recently been strained. “Human, have you selflessness inside you?”

Will finds he does not know the answer. He thought perhaps he once had. Now he does not think so. He left where he had been needed the most to live a life of solitude, helping no one and saving no one and feeding animals that are not merely animals. He stares the bird who is not a bird in the eye and whispers “No.”

Silence stretches between them for a long moment before the raven rustles it wings and lowers its beak to the congealing mess before it. It raises its head and in its beak holds a large gold coin. Will stares at in bewilderment. There is blackness smeared across the face but it is unmistakably a coin. A most valuable coin judging by its size and thickness. The raven speaks and its voice is not muffled. “We give you this coin Will Graham. If you are selfish uses this coin upon yourself.”

For a moment Will is completely terrified. This raven should not know his name. it should not be able to speak. It should not have been able to swallow and then eject a coin twice the size of its beak. But Will is here and he is awake and he has seen this all with his own eyes. The Dark Wood is strange and full of the strange things as Will knew it would be. He accepts the coin but he will not spend it for himself. He knows better than to tempt fate any more than he already has.

~*~

One morning his routine is broken by the appearance of a woman in white. She steps into his front lawn and stares at him and the ravens. The ravens stare back for a long moment before, in unison, they abandoned their bread crumbs and ascend to the roof of his cabin.

Will is weary of a suddenly appearing stranger. He continues to stand on his porch until she picks her way across the grass to stand before him at the bottom of the steps of his cabin. Her dress shines pristine in the morning sunlight and he fights the urge to shield his eyes from its bright reflection.

“Excuse me sir…?” Her voice is light and wavering. She is the epitome of a damsel in distress and Will suspects he will be the one to save her. This is not what he would prefer his morning to entail.

“Hello miss.” He says, voice stilited from lack of use.

Her fingers nervously pluck at the sleeves of her dress and Will watches them in favorite of looking at her tear stained face.

“Sir, I have become lost in the wood. Will you help me?” She sounds a meek as a terrified child and Will sighs in defeat, having lost the battle before the war had even started.

“Of course miss. There is a way out of the wood less an hours walk from here.”

She visibly sags in relief and Will gather supplies and Winston both for the walk.

She trails behind him, Winston keeping pace with her, as they pick their way through the trees. Will has not walked the way from the wood in a very long time, so long in fact he

doesn't know if it is winter or spring. The wood does not change season. The wood is timeless.

She attempts to make conversation but Will has not interest in speaking with her. She seems to speak more to hear her own voice than for his response so he does not feel guilty for not indulging her.

They have walked almost a full hour, her pace being much slower than he is used to, when he hears the low growling of the wolves.

He turns and sees the glowing eyes of the pack that travels around his cabin. He has caught glimpse of them time and time again and this time, as all the others, he feels no fear. These are creatures that could kill him without a moment's thought but he is unafraid. Winston, too, is unafraid of the wolves. He steps away from the woman and to Wills side, watching the wolves watching Will.

The woman turns to see what has caught his attention. She sees the wolves shifting on their paws and chewing their jaws. She screams. She turns to run from the sight she must find horrifying but Will catches her before she can go more than a step. He holds her arm tightly and says low and certain “They will kill you if you run.”

She is trembling in his hold and the wolves have stepped closer at the sent of her fear.

“Leave her be.” Will says. He does not think the wolves will understand him but the ravens had seems raves only and they spoke. Perhaps these wolves appear as wolves but speak with human tongues as well.

A wolf that is as black as a shadow steps forward. It opens is jaws and words fall from its fangs, the act looking as unnatural as it’s voice sounds throughout the trees.

“We feast of three.” it says, the sound rasped and echoing. The other wolves shift from paw to paw behind it, eager now that their leader had made it’s declaration.

“No.” Will says simply. He does not know why he would be so forward with such beings but he is strangely confident. These wolves will not eat him or his dog or this strange woman in white.

Beside him Winston barks once. Will jerks in surprise at the sound. Winston has been silent since the night Will found him by the strange black pond.

In unison the wolves fall back into the trees until only their shadow pack leader is left. It starts with it’s strange eyes before finally it too leaves, soundless.

Winston stands and continues on. Will releases the hold he had not realized he still had on the woman and follows his dog while the woman follows him. She is quiet the rest of the walk and when they finally reach the edge of the wood she steps out into the full rays of the sunlight and does not look back as she whispers her thanks.

The walk back to his home is quiet and easy and Will puts the second talking being he has met out of his mind.

But when he hunts his next deer he spreads a portion of the meat with the interests he leaves in the wood for the wolves.

~*~

He is once again selling his meager wears in the marketplace. The market is as it always is: people that look slightly less than people look, people who sell trinkets far stranger than his could ever be, people who sell animals that look like animals but do not make the sounds animals would make. Instead they make no sound at all. He has always been unnerved by the strange silence of the animals but now, after the raven has spoken to him he wonders if these animals too can speak. If the deer and rabbits he has hunted could speak. He does not know how he feels about these thoughts, but he is sure he does not like it.

He spends several hours on his blanket at the market, selling several trinkets. He is set slightly apart from other venders, there is not rhyme or reason to the places that the vendor's sell, livestock and merchants and food stalls mixed haphazardly together.

He is sat in the market with his carved bones and tanned hides spread before him on a woven rug he had bought on his second trip to buy his bread. It is a plan green rug without markings so as not to distract the eye of any buyer his goods might attract.

He slowly starts to place his leftover wears into the large travel pack he brought to the wood with him the day he left his old and tired life behind when a chill sweeps down his spine.

He feels eyes heavy upon his back. Slowly he turns and finds a man walking down the makeshift path through the center of the marketplace. He is tall and broad and wears the cloth of a well kept merchant. He holds a long harness in one hand and several bags in the other.

At the end of the harness is the most beautiful being Will has ever laid eyes on. It is tall, taller than the merchant, taller than Will. A thick crown of antlers grace the top of the being’s head, adding height and beauty. The antlers are pitch dark in the soft sunlight of evening and Wills breath catches as he is reminded of the still pond he found once but never again.

He is standing, walking towards the being before he had fully realized he has moved. The being looks down upon Will with eyes that as dark as the shadow wolf that spoke, as all knowing as the ravens that Will bribes goodwill from. As red as the blood of the injured deer Will killed in an act of self serving mercy.

The being’s beautiful fur is not fur at all, but shining gleaming feathers. They shift color in the setting sun and Will finds he longs to touch. He does not for fear his hand will become a part of the being and he will lose himself in to it’s shadows.

From his side the merchant loudly clears his throat, breaking the beautiful silence that had fallen between Will and the being.

Will turns to the man, angry and relieved to have had the spell broken.

“If you want it so badly it is for sale, although at a price you could obviously not afford.” The merchant speaks in derision. It is clear he looks down upon Will in his well worn clothing and messy curls.

Will feels the weight of the gold coin the raven gave him.

He has kept it in a small leather pouch around his neck. He had not known why he kept it so close but now he understands. The coin was never for him to use, as he has known from the moment it was given with a warning. The coin is for this being who is wearing the raven feathers it shares with beings that speak voices that do not belong to their shape.

Will pulls the pouch from his neck and hands it to the merchant without a word.

The merchant takes the pouch and opens it, the coin falling to his palm and gleaming golden as the sun. He stares down the coin, open mouthed and greedy eyed.

For a moment the merchant looks from the coin to Will and back again before deciding the worth of the coin is greater than the question of where it had come from.

He drops the raines he is holding and, with a sneer at Will, turns to quickly continue on his way.

Will turns back to the being, coming face to face with it. The great and beautiful antlers rested upon its head like the crown of an ancient royal creature. He does not know if this is such a creature but it stands before him with such a strength of presence that he must fight the urge to bow.

With trembling hands Will steps away from the being. “Please give me a moment.” he whispers, although he does not know if the ravenstag, for it looks a stag but it’s feathered pelt makes it both the creatures at once, will understand him as the ravens do but hoping it will.

He gathers his wears and blanket, grateful that he had had the foresight to buy his needed bread and books before he had set to sell his goods so that he could leave the market place as quickly as he needed to.

When he turns back he is expecting the ravenstag to rage against him turning his back and to gouge him with its fearsome crown, only to find it is standing still and staring at Will with it’s dark, depthless eyes.

Will holds his breath a moment, waiting for the creature to move or look away. It does neither and Will sighs deeply before very slowly and carefully reaching out to very lightly hold onto the reins of the being.

His fear that the creature could kill him with a single thought grows as he says, voice shaking “Will you follow me?”

The creature starts to walk, headless of Will’s hold on the reins, pulling Will along with its graceful steps.

It takes him farther into the trees, away from the marketplace and then off the main trail, into the thick trees.

Will follows almost in a daze until finally the being stops and turns to Will expectantly.

Will instantly drops his hold of the reins and steps away from the creature instinctively.

The creature does not even blink at him. It stands perfectly motionless as it stares into Will's eyes.

Slowly and with great caution Will reaches forward and unhooks the muzzle from the creature's snout.

Once the creature is free and the muzzle is heavy in Will's hand, the creature turns away from him without a backwards glance and disappears into the shadows of the wood.

Will pants for breath for a moment before running back to the path, for the first time since his arrival feeling unsafe in the Dark Wood.

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